

elevate your RELATIONSHIP

Staying Together After the Loss of a Child

When couples learn that they are having a baby, they begin planning and dreaming of their future family—bringing the baby home, the first word, first step, first day of school, graduation day, etc. The natural order of life events, however, is thrown out of balance when a child dies.

Despite a long-held belief that most couples who have experienced the death of one of their children eventually divorce, some couple relationships remain the same, while others grow even stronger. Those with stronger marriages tend to have less difficulty with the grieving process, while those that were troubled before the death will experience increased levels of stress and difficulty. Even though there is no guarantee of a positive outcome, here are a few strategies that can help relationships remain strong.

- **Talk openly.** Open communication between partners about the loss is essential. Typically, partners want to talk about their couple relationship, plans for the future, and how they want to remember, honor, and celebrate their child's life.
- **There is no correct way to grieve.** Grief is an individual process that brings out a vast array of emotions and reactions. It is normal for husbands and wives to express their grief differently even though they have experienced the same loss. Develop an understanding and acceptance of the differences in each other's expressions and reactions to grief.
- **Seek support from others.** Because they feel uncomfortable and do not know what to say or do to be helpful, friends and family members often distance themselves from couples who have experienced the loss of a child. That leaves more time for the couple to be together, at a time when they have little strength left to support each other. A grief support group or professional counselor can provide a safe setting in which couples can talk about the loss, try to make sense of it, and develop realistic expectations about the grief process.

In spite of the fact that time helps to ease the pain, grief over a child's death usually lasts a lifetime. Years after the death, an innocent question from a well intended stranger, such as "How many children do you have?" can stir strong emotions. Acknowledging that the death was a significant loss and realizing intense feelings can surface unexpectedly helps parents cope.

Although it is clear that the death of a child disrupts the couple relationship, most marriages survive. Some couples grow even closer as they achieve a greater understanding of what life and death means, develop a new set of priorities, and a deeper commitment to the marital relationship.

Activity

Keeping the lines of communication open after the loss of a child is extremely important in keeping the marriage healthy. Although it is difficult, make time to share with each other what you are feeling and how you are coping. Here are some questions to help start the conversation:

- Do we want to remember our child in a unique or special way?
- What are some ways you have found useful to cope?
- Are there any boundaries that need to be created for each partner to cope (i.e., activities to avoid, items to keep, etc.)? Understand that these may change as time passes.
- Do we individually and/or together need to seek outside support? If so, what kind and from who?

Don't feel the need to rush into these questions. Take your time and respect each others need for time to feel comfortable and ready for these discussion. Be willing to listen. Understand that each person copes in different ways.

For more resources, visit healthyrelationships.uga.edu and ElevateCouplesGeorgia.com.

extension.uga.edu

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